



## Chapter 1 - Decentring Urban Governance: Agency, Resistance, and Place: Introduction

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# **Chapter 1 – Decentring Urban Governance: Agency, Resistance, and Place**

## **Introduction**

Over the last twenty years governance has become both a ‘fashionable and challenging concept’ (Chhotry and Stoker 2010: 1). It has given rise to an inter-disciplinary field of study, informed by a range of different theoretical perspectives, united by a common concern to understand the changing role of the state. Governance scholars seek to explore the transition from government to governance that has occurred following the crisis of the state, drawing attention not only to new relationships between the state, market and civil society, but also a new politics (Bevir 2013). The general argument is that the state has become ‘hollowed out’. It is now ineffective and fiscally constrained, having lost its sovereign powers to international bodies and global flows of capital. This reflects increasing global economic integration due to the influence of neoliberal ideologies (Brenner 2004), but also the growing importance of supra-national institutions such as the United Nations and the World Bank, in addition to the rise of localism and regionalism within territories. Consequently, the state can no longer provide and deliver all public services by itself. Instead it must mobilise non-state actors, from both the voluntary and private sector, to deliver upon policy goals. This has led to the increased marketization of public services, as witnessed by the introduction of new public management techniques in Britain and elsewhere (Bevir and McKee, 2016). It has also given rise to network governance (Davies 2011, Rhodes 1997), and the ‘empowerment’ of active citizens through non-market technologies of governance (McKee 2016; Raco and Imrie 2000). These shifts have further called into question the territorial focus on the nation-state. Whilst some commentators have questioned the adequacy of the state to govern, given it is simply one actor in a complex web of global multi-level governance, others have drawn attention to its pivotal role as the ‘saviour’ of contemporary capitalism following the 2007/8 global financial crisis.

Although there is much consensus within the literature that the state's power and authority is changing, the nature and extent of these shifts remains contested. Bell and Hindmoor (2009) have characterised these different schools of thought in terms of 'state centred' and 'society centred' approaches. The latter draws attention to the rolled back neo-liberal state, which now lacks the ability to govern unilaterally and so must work with non-state actors to deliver governmental objectives. Such approaches, typically downplay the power and authority of the state, and instead focus on new forms of governing arrangements such as partnerships and networks. By contrast, 'state centred' approaches highlight the continued and important role of the state in governing processes, emphasising that the state is governing differently not less. A particularly influential approach has been 'metagovernance', which they define as the 'government of governance' (Bell and Hindmoor 2009: 46). Instead of withering away, state authority has adapted and continues to play a critical role in co-ordinating and steering governing processes. Such approaches tend to emphasise the 'tools, strategies, and relationships used by governments to help govern' (2009: 2), which includes traditional hierarchical forms of command and control, in addition to more hands-off regulatory approaches (see for example, Raco 2013, Jessop 2002). Importantly, both the traditions highlighted by Bell and Hindmoor seek to provide a general account of what governance looks like. They accept states have become fragmented and networks have thrived (Bevir 2013). Moreover, they adopt very essentialist and generalist accounts of the state: assuming that it is an entity that exists and exerts control (Bevir and Rhodes 2010). A more diverse view of state authority is however possible by 'decentering' governance as this introductory chapter will explore.

### **Understanding Urban Governance**

The 'urban' has been a key locale of these governing shifts (Harvey 1989). Cities and regions are key engines of economic growth, and the sites at which the contradictions of 'actually

existing neoliberalism' are most visible, as manifest in patterns of uneven development and social-spatial inequalities. This in turn has implications for cohesion and inclusion, not least as cities are where most of the world's populations now live. As Brenner (2004) comments, urban policy has become an essential political mechanism by which transformation of nation states has been occurring (see also, Cochrane 2007). Against this backdrop urban scholars have made significant contributions to the governance literature across a range of sub-fields. Empirically, these can be summarised into five main categories: urban entrepreneurialism, planning and regeneration, housing and anti-social behaviour, reshaping welfare settlements, and innovation and activism. The size, complexity and inter-disciplinarity of the urban governance literature makes categorisation a challenge, and in reality there is overlap across these key fields of research. For brevity these debates have been summarised here succinctly.

A longstanding and strong thread within urban governance has been that of urban entrepreneurialism and competitive cities. The key argument is that contemporary forms of state restructuring can be traced back to the crisis in Fordism and the Keynesian welfare state in the 1970s (Brenner 2004; Jessop 2002; Harvey 1989). Following the shift to post-Fordism and the erosion of the post-war welfare settlement, the role of the state is no longer to alleviate the consequences of uneven capitalist development, but to exacerbate it through the use of locational strategies to maximise the global positioning of particular places in the urban hierarchy. The fortunes of cities are therefore linked to effective competition for industry, jobs and investment, with local governments having critical roles to play as 'dealmakers' in advancing local and regional interests (Mackinnon 2012). This 'civic boosterism' is evident in large-scale, international projects and events such as the Commonwealth and Olympic Games, and international festivals of culture, whereby cities seek to project themselves on a global stage through branding and place-marketing (Ashworth and Voogd 1995; Mooney 2004; Jewson and MacGregor 1997; Paton et al 2012;).

Urban entrepreneurialism re-imagines the ‘problem’ of cities as the problem of urban decline, with narratives of managerialism going hand-in-hand with a faith in the capacity of the private-sector to deliver economic growth, success and prosperity (Damer 1989; Clarke and Newman 1997).

Building on these arguments, others have drawn attention to how the requirement to revamp a city’s image, and compete for skilled workers, has fuelled the regeneration and property led re-development of formerly industrial and working-class areas. This has contributed not only to state-led gentrification (Uitermark, Duyyendak and Kleinhans 2007), but also the valorization of particular forms of housing consumption – owner-occupation – over and above others (McIntyre and McKee 2008). The prominence of private sector interests has been well documented in Raco’s (2013) detailed exploration of private finance initiatives in the UK, which has seen private companies finance, build, manage and operate public infrastructure that is in turn rented back to the state at significant cost. Tracing a growing geopolitics of private power and vested interests, Raco emphasises how reform of the British welfare state has opened up business opportunities in terms of building schools, hospitals and managing welfare contracts, in turn, contributing to the rise of ‘regulatory capitalism’. With localities encouraged to think about their business potential, and governments playing a critical role in institutionalising private sector involvement, corporate power is argued to have transcended the simple dualism of the market and the state.

The impact of civic boosterism, and the use of “regeneration” by governments has also led to a global preoccupation with gentrification. Moving on from Glass’ original (1964) conception of the first-wave of gentrification, globally cities are now attempting to manage in-flows of global capital. Marxian analyses focus on the exploitation of the rent-gap by property developers to transform cities into investment opportunities (Lees, Slater *et al.* 2013). The

impact of this on urban residents is the transformation of housing into an asset-base for global investors. The French economist Thomas Piketty has drawn attention to the yawning gap between the extremely wealthy and everyone else in most industrialised countries. In an analysis of London, Burrows *et.al.* (Burrows, Webber *et al.* 2016) demonstrate how this has led to the development of ‘alpha-territories’ of the super-rich, where Georgian houses are the facades to modern urban mansions developed behind and below. Practically, regeneration has become a term associated with non-managed urban growth that displaces everyone but the global super-rich. Policies that should be inclusive – such as “complete streets” or “living streets” – inadvertently become tools of displacement and wider rapid socio-economic change (Zavestoski and Agyeman 2015).

At the other extreme, the important role of housing as a key part of the urban social context, in understanding contemporary governing practices has long been recognised (Damer 2000). New public management reforms introduced by the Conservative governments in the UK in the 1980s were highly influential in the waves of housing reforms that followed, which sought to promote social housing tenants as empowered citizen-consumers capable of exercising choice (McKee 2016; Jacobs and Manzi 2010). Moreover, as Flint (2006) argues social housing management has long been concerned with “policing” the behaviour of its tenants, with housing at the forefront of efforts to regulate community relations and construct accepted norms of behaviour as far back as the mid-nineteenth century. Conditionality, now a common narrative in political and policy debates around welfare, has been an enduring theme within housing management, reflecting moral distinctions between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor. These longstanding binary divisions are clearly visible in current UK Conservative government policy interventions, which seek to reshape the welfare settlement through restricting eligibility to the social security system, introducing sanctions for non-compliance and increasing welfare conditionality. Although not new, such initiatives have

accelerated since the global financial crisis and the introduction of austerity measures (McKee 2016; Dwyer and Wright 2014). They build on previous attempts to responsabilise citizens and further reduce the role of the state in welfare provision. The often punitive governmental strategies they fuel, reflect particular understandings of the causes and the solutions to poverty: debates that have again come to the fore in UK politics.

Yet the “urban” has also been a key site of innovation and activism – including new forms of inter-agency working, local democratic practice, and service provision. As Featherstone et al (2011) have commented, in this context the “local” can be constructed in antagonism to the state, challenging potential claims over how places are made and contesting the effects of regressive state policies. This not only opens up the potential for new spaces of engagement, but may feed into broader social and political movements. Writing in the 1980s, Castells (1983) advanced similar arguments highlighting the potential of the “urban” for radical political reform and grassroots democratic renewal (e.g. New Urban Left in 1980s). The growth of the Occupy Movement after 2008, and the emergence of new ways of managing cities in the global south, particularly South America, point the way to different ways of re-establishing a right to the city (Harvey 2012). Nonetheless, the urban governance literature has also underlined the challenges of such attempts to revitalise and transform local democracy through strategic partnership working, and the engagement, involvement and empowerment of both citizens and communities (see for example, Matthews 2011, 2012; McKee 2011; Barnes and Prior 2009; Barnes, Sullivan and Newman 2007; Clarke et al 2007; Taylor 2007).

A key contemporary change in governing practices is the growth of co-production and asset-based community development. Co-production, in particular, has been closely aligned to governing agendas such as the “Big Society”, the initiative by the UK Government to involve

citizens in the delivery of public services (Williams, Goodwin *et al.* 2014). For its proponents, co-production overcomes many of the political challenges of previous governing reforms, offering opportunities for genuine involvement of citizens in the design and delivery of public services (Durose and Richardson 2016). Critically, others have highlighted how, within an agenda of urban austerity, efforts to engage citizens are unlikely to be successful without effective support and resourcing of an active state (Sullivan 2012). Another key risk is that some communities and individuals are more effective at co-production, exacerbating already large inequalities (Hastings and Matthews 2015). Further, asset-based community development has been subject to the same Marxist critiques of its forebears – that it does little to overcome the structural inequalities that produce the conditions it seeks to tackle (MacLeod and Emejulu 2014).

As this section has highlighted, the urban governance literature has been dominated by theoretical perspectives concerned with the state and the market, reflecting in part, the influence of Marxist, Marxian, and neo-Marxist theories in critiquing the “real-existing neoliberalism” within contemporary urban environments (see for example, Davies 2011; Wacquant 2008; Brenner 2004; Peck and Tickell 2002; Harvey 1989). This means less attention has been paid to situated agency, and the way in which actors have resisted and contested practices of governance on the ground. There are however some notable exceptions to this, for example McKee’s (2016, 2011, 2009b) work on social housing, Nixon and Parr’s (2006) writings on anti-social behaviour, and Lippert and Stenson’s (2010) work within criminology – all of which have been influenced by post-structuralist theory, especially that of Foucault. Similarly, planning theory, incorporating Habermas’ theory of communicative action, and structuration theory, has offered potential ways forward to radically democratise urban policy decisions, and understand agential change when new actors are brought into urban governance (Healey 1997; Fischer 2003; Matthews 2013). Despite the strong narrative



of ever-present neoliberalism underpinning much of the urban governance debates there are, of course, webs of meaning other than neoliberalism that are important to understanding contemporary governing practices (Bevir 2016; Ong 2007).

Ultimately, these differences in emphasis amongst urban governance scholars reflect alternative conceptualisations of not only the state, but also power and resistance. Whilst understandings of power as a negative, repressive act have tended to dominate the social sciences, this has been challenged by post-structuralist theory with its emphasis on the productive dimension (McKee 2009a; McKee and Cooper 2008). The latter rejects power as a prohibitory concept, in favour of a focus on situated agency. Power and freedom are not viewed in antagonism, rather as being inextricably linked. In this context, resistance is not understood in terms of liberation from an oppressor, rather as an alternative to current governing practices. This provides scope to explore the messy, contested, and contingent nature of governing in situ.

### **Decentring Urban Governance**

Developing an understanding of situated agency and resistance to governing practices requires a conceptual approach that goes beyond theories of the state and the market. Governance scholars within this field have typically drawn on constructionist and post-structuralist theory situated within a range of different disciplines. There is much to be learned from these varied perspectives, and value in working across disciplines and gaining exposure to different ideas and methods (Barry and Born 2013; Chhotray and Stoker 2010). Whilst each discipline has its own key thinkers and conceptual anchor-points there are nonetheless common intellectual threads uniting scholars interested in decentering urban governance (Bevir 2013). This includes a rejection of the over-generalised accounts that dominate the governance literature, in favour of an acceptance and engagement with

variation, contingency and contestation. Disciplines such as geography and anthropology have been pivotal here in bringing much needed historical, temporal and spatial nuance to governance studies (see for example, McKee 2016, 2009a; Brady 2014; Li 2014, 2007; Ong 2007; Sharma 2008). It is fundamentally a humanist approach that recognises situated agency, and the capacity of governable subjects to challenge dominant policy and political narratives, by thinking and acting otherwise. This is underpinned by an interpretivist epistemology. Although a broad church, interpretivism problematizes notions of objective truth, emphasising instead the contingent basis of social reality through a focus on meanings, ideas and social practices (Jacobs, Kemeny and Manzi 2004). Decentring therefore involves a recognition that governance is constructed differently by different actors, and requires a more fluid and diverse understanding of state authority, which rejects its reification as a monolithic, causal structure (Bevir 2016). It is an approach that recognises the state as being fragmented, with the boundaries between the state, market and civil society being increasingly blurred and fluid. Moreover, decentring governance necessitates understanding the diverse sets of narratives, meanings and actions that comprise governing practices. It is micro-level in its focus highlighting how governance is created, sustained and modified, thereby opening up space to interrogate how the gap between official discourse and local practice is manifest, managed and reconfigured.

Adopting a decentred approach therefore has implications for methods (Bevir 2016; McKee 2009). An understanding of governing practices and the different narratives people employ requires qualitative methods that allow individual stories to be captured, interpreted and understood. This requires going beyond textual analysis and embracing more ethnographic qualitative methods. This is crucial, for the mere fact governing narratives evoke subjects to behave in particular ways does not in itself guarantee that “docile” subjects will comply. As Clarke (2004: 8) has commented, ‘people may not know their place in these summonings –

not least because they have other places, positions and possibilities that allow, or even require, them to negotiate their ‘answers’’. An examination of governing in situ therefore demands an ethnographic approach that allows analytical space to consider resistance, contestation and the messiness of governance. A bottom-up focus is essential to fully grasp the contingency of governance and the diversity of competing narratives at play.

The chapters in this book pursue a decentred approach to urban governance. Combined they provide a rich, interdisciplinary, empirical account of governing practices and resistance. Given the breadth of the urban governance field the empirical focus of this book is ultimately selective, with the chapters concentrating on developments within housing, planning, regeneration, and welfare and labour market reforms in the British context. With regards to scale it concentrates on the neighbourhood and community level, for it is not only a major site at which social-spatial inequalities and social problems are concentrated and managed by governing authorities, but it is also consistent with the conceptual interest of the contributing authors on decentring governance. This presumes an interest in local narratives, practices and contestation at the micro-level. Each of the chapters that follow will explore these core themes from different policy areas.

In the first section we focus on the individual as a subject of urban governance. The increasing conditionality of welfare systems has been understood as one of the key tools of contemporary neo-liberalism. Ascribing the values of *homo economicus* to a varied population, it seeks to shape actors to behave as required. Drawing on a large-scale research study, Flint adds richness to this debate. Using interviews from welfare recipients and families subject to “troubled families” interventions, he explores how the receipt of welfare can be better understood using Foucault’s concept of “the duel”, marked by complex webs of resistance, acceptance and collusion. In implementing this conditionality, the state is

increasingly using diverse actors to deliver policy, particularly private and third-sector enterprises. The voluntary sector, supported by para-governmental funding, such as income from lotteries, is filling the gaps the retreating state has left. Crisp and Powell's chapter explores one such initiative, Talent Match, funded by the UK Big Lottery to help get people into work. Switching to a more positive notion of governmentality, bringing in relational theory, they demonstrate how co-production, and the involvement of unemployed people in the governance of the project, has produced more positive outcomes.

The next section moves onto understand the individual within those structures in society that ascribe inequality and difference, namely gender, age (childhood) and race and ethnicity. Bringing in feminist theory to a decentered theory of urban governance, Beebeejaun focuses on how urban planning has inscribed patriarchy on the city, excluding women in decision-making and in space-and-place. Focusing on resistance from a gendered perspective, the effective agency of women in resisting developments such as non-conventional gas extraction, or fracking, is demonstrated. Looking at the experience of children, Wood shows how land-use planning, which is increasingly focused on economic development, has presumed itself to be a service for adults. Using a framework from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and comparing practice between Scotland and Wales, the chapter points to the positive, emancipatory power on human rights perspectives in governance. While contemporary urban governance has emerged from a variety of discourses and practices, the chapter by Matthews and Astbury begins to point to the role of academic knowledge itself in creating governance regimes. Focusing on community empowerment in Scotland, the chapter highlights the centrality of Scottish experience of partnership working by the local state with communities in broader experiences of governance in the UK. Using a detailed account of a participatory event in one neighbourhood, it then disrupts this by demonstrating that the community envisaged by governance is mono-cultural, if not monolithic. In reality

communities are increasingly diverse and governance is a process of negotiating discomfort and oblique exclusion and racism.

The final section of the book focuses on policy more broadly and its implementation, and the use of different policy tools – particularly statute. Continuing the theme of understanding the role of academics in urban governance, O’Brien and Campbell introduce the most recent variant of “The Liverpool Model” – using one-off cultural mega-events, in this case the year of European Capital of Culture – in producing a new model of culture-based urban policy. Interview material from the academic evaluation partners shows how seeming truths about the impact of the event led to the emergence of a new policy model. Bringing in insights from actor-network theory, they explain how this manifested itself in the UK Capital of Culture model. The final two chapters, Carr and Layard, bring in a socio-legal perspective with decentered governance. The two cases describe the application of historic housing law, and contemporary law on localism and neighbourhood planning, through the decisions of the Courts. Using detailed analyses of specific rulings, these chapters show how the courts, and the application of the law itself, it as agent of resistance in urban governance. While large court cases, or hearings, have been the focus of studies in urban governance before, the socio-legal perspective brings novel insights, in particular an articulation and interpretation of how judges have applied the law in specific cases.

## **Conclusion**

The urban governance literature is vast and diverse. The influence of constructionist and post-structural theory has contributed to an increasing number of studies concerned with the messy and contested nature of governing in situ. Yet, despite the growing range of these studies, scholars might gain further insights in urban governance by adopting decentred theory. This requires greater sensitivity to governing narratives and practices, situated agency, and a

departure from treating the state as a monolithic entity. This introduction has articulated why such accounts are needed:

- The urban governance literature has been dominated by theoretical perspectives informed by the state and the market. Although important and influential to our understanding, there are of course webs of meaning other than neo-liberalism. Moreover, the state is not a coherent, monolithic entity. It is fragmented, its relationships with non-state actors shifting and fluid, and it lacks the essentialist properties often ascribed to it. Decentered theory allows us to re-imagine and rethink the role of state in contemporary governance. Doing so requires us to transcend traditional understandings of power and authority that have dominated the social sciences, and embrace the insights offered by constructionist and post-structural theory.
- Most accounts of contemporary governance are very general in nature. They lack historical, temporal and spatial nuance, and sufficient attention to the messy and contested nature of governance. By decentering governance and considering governing in situ at the micro-level, we can get beyond abstract accounts and adopt an empirical and methodological focus that emphasizes human agency, subjective understanding, and local narratives and practice. Methodologically this requires embracing ethnographic methods, and getting beyond textual analysis alone.

The richly detailed, interdisciplinary, empirical accounts in the rest of this volume begin to offer this application of decentered theory to an urban governance context. In doing so we show the multi-scalar, nuanced and partial nature of governance in the contemporary world.

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